

COURTENAY SMITHERS – BEFORE AUSTRALIA

ALETTA (SMILA) SMITHERS

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Abstract

The entomologist, Courtenay Neville Smithers (1925-2011), was born in South Africa and schooled both there and in England, developing an early interest in natural history. After serving in World War II, he returned to South Africa and trained at universities in Pretoria and Grahamstown, culminating in an MSc thesis on citrus entomology. While working in various applied posts in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and South Africa on tsetse fly, acacia entomology and general agricultural pests, he developed an interest in taxonomy of Psocoptera and moved to the Australian Museum in Sydney, as insect curator, in 1960.

Courtenay Neville Smithers was born on 29 August, 1925 in Pretoria, South Africa. His family were of English descent and lived in Natal. His father, Robert Francis Smithers, was a public servant, later magistrate, who was also heavily involved with sports administration. At age eight his father died and in 1938 his mother, Matilda Rebecca (Tilly), with her four daughters and Courtenay made their home in England, where the eldest married daughter lived. Courtenay's four grown up brothers remained in South Africa. At this time he was too old to sit for the exam to get him into a school where he could qualify for university so he went to the local school. This particular school had a teacher who was interested in soccer and the "new" boy was soon in their first team and, as an under 13 team, they never lost a match. The boys were excused class, no matter what the subject or time of the day, to practise soccer. He was selected for special training by soccer scouts who were searching for likely lads for professional soccer clubs when they finished school. Courtenay's mother did not approve of soccer as a career so, with the help of the Methodist minister and a friendly headmaster, he was sent to a small private school. (Courtenay's passion for soccer remained with him for the rest of his life). There was little money so his mother could not afford the fees required for science lessons. He was a good student and managed to pass the Oxford School Certificate. He was a prefect and, continuing with his music lessons, played the piano for school assembly. During the nights he had to be on fire watch and in the mornings go to class as usual. In 1943, aged 18, he was called up (Fig. 1).

Courtenay was sent to Northern Ireland to train with the 1st Battalion of the Royal Ulster Rifles, 6th Airborne Division. Rigorous training across the mountains and swamps of County Tyrone prepared Courtenay for his time ahead. Transported in gliders on D-day (6 June 1944), the troops landed behind the German coastal defences in Normandy. The following morning he was captured by the Germans and, after many months in railway cattle carriages and unbelievable hardship, eventually ended up in a POW camp in Poland to work in a coal mine. When the Russian army was approaching the

whole camp started on a march to the south. Most of them died as it was in the middle of a European winter with virtually no food. The march eventually reached Czechoslovakia, where US soldiers released them in late 1945. Courtenay's survival was mainly because of the fitness he acquired while training to be an airborne soldier and his stubbornness to make it to life after the war. His brothers had fought with the South African forces.

As a schoolboy he became interested in natural history. His mother did not approve of this because, as with soccer, she felt playing with insects was no way to earn a decent living. He nevertheless roamed the English countryside collecting insects and breeding them in the garage. He became an avid birdwatcher and spent his spare time in the local library learning all he could about animals in general. One of his sisters gave him a copy of A.D. Imms' classic *General Textbook of Entomology* and with it he taught himself to use the keys to identify the insects and learn general insect biology. By the time he came out of the army in 1947 his mind was made up. He and his family had returned to South Africa after the War so he worked at any sort of job, mainly selling motorcar parts, to eke out enough money to go to university. With a small loan from the ex-servicemen's league and living with his mother, he went to Pretoria University to study BSc Agriculture, a 4-year course. After two years of trying to study in a language foreign to him (Pretoria was then an Afrikaans-speaking university), he managed to pass but realised that he knew enough entomology to teach his teacher, so he transferred to Rhodes University in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape. His two years at Pretoria did not qualify him for the formal science degree but they allowed him 1st year. That year, 1949, he met Aletta du Preez, whose home was in Rhodesia but was in her third year at Teachers' Training College in Grahamstown. She'd been known since babyhood as "Smila" because of her happy disposition and the name stuck for life.

After he graduated he decided to try for an MSc funded by African Explosives (who also made all the chemicals for agriculture). This degree had very little course work; it was mainly practical research with a thesis at the end and covered the years 1952-53. There is a very large citrus plantation near Port Elizabeth where he was given accommodation and assistance to undertake a study of all insect pests of citrus. During the season every tree was covered by tarpaulin and cyanide gas was pumped into this "tent". Courtenay had placed covers on the ground beneath each tree to catch everything that had been living in the canopy. When the covers were removed next morning the catch was stored in jars to be sorted during the day. Many hundreds of these samples were taken during the season. At the time he (mentally) thanked Imms for preparing him for sorting all these insects and this also stood him in good stead when he had a whole insect collection in his charge at the Australian Museum in later life. Smila was teaching in Rhodesia at the time and she travelled to South Africa during her school holidays to type the thesis, having learned to touch type by

correspondence especially to do this. Courtenay had neither time nor money to do it himself. Courtenay sorted the insects and wrote it all up, getting specialists from all over the world to identify to species the insects in their particular fields.



Fig. 1. Courtenay Smithers aged 18 and in British Army uniform, with his mother Matilda in England in 1944.

Now the aim was to find employment. Having a 1st class pass in both degrees in entomology and botany, Courtenay was offered some jobs, the first being at the Horticulture Department just outside Pretoria. He turned this down, not wanting to live too close to his authoritarian mother! The next one was a better paying job but with an insecticide company. He turned this down for obvious reasons. He then successfully applied to the Southern Rhodesian Government for a post in the Tsetse Fly Eradication programme.

The reason for eliminating tsetse flies (*Glossina* spp.) was to enable large tracts of lowveld (bush) country to become habitable for humans. Tsetse flies spread sleeping sickness in humans and, as the veterinary disease nagana, it kills most domestic animals. The local African population depends on cattle and goats for their living so they could not live in this huge area of country without them. The tsetse fly is small, much like an ordinary housefly, but it has a bite similar to that of a tabanid. The idea at that time was to eradicate *all* wild mammals that carry the disease but are immune to the sickness. Large numbers of African men were employed to shoot all targeted mammals. The entomologist in charge paid each man each month by counting the tails of the dead animals. They were also given standard maize meal and salt for the month and enough bullets to go on with. Their meat supply came from the animals they shot. Courtenay was also employed, apart from supervising the monthly gathering of all the hunters, to study the tsetse fly populations, where they were most numerous and so on. These counts were made by driving slowly (the pace of a walking mammal) with the workers collecting all the flies that settled on the green coloured truck in small butterfly nets (Fig. 2). Every tenth of a mile the truck stopped and the collected flies were counted and sexed. There were usually no roads and they drove through the bush following blaze marks on trees, often with one of the African staff walking ahead to find the next marked tree. Their first car (Fig. 3) was understandably kept for town use!

For Courtenay this was a wonderful job. He saw all the animals in the bush at close quarters. The elephants wreaked damage to plant life as they meandered through the bush, warthogs dug holes, lions lived freely among the other animals, antelopes of all types were plentiful and it was a wonderful life for a man used to life in England or in a city in Africa. He was too busy doing his daily chores to think about normal insects and in life afterwards he always regretted not being able to collect insects in that uninhabited area of Africa. Later he was moved to a more civilised part where aerial spraying was tried. Here the country was more open and so long tracts of bush and valleys considered suitable were measured out by compass bearings and marked by long poles with balloons at the ends for small crop-dusting planes spraying insecticide to kill the tsetse flies (and all other insects too). From earlier studies it was found that tsetse flies spent daytime hours in these valleys and could thus be more easily destroyed there instead of trying to spray the whole



Fig. 2. Courtenay Smithers at the wheel of the green truck used in testse fly transect surveys at Sebungwe, near Bulawayo, Rhodesia in early 1950s with the help of African assistants.

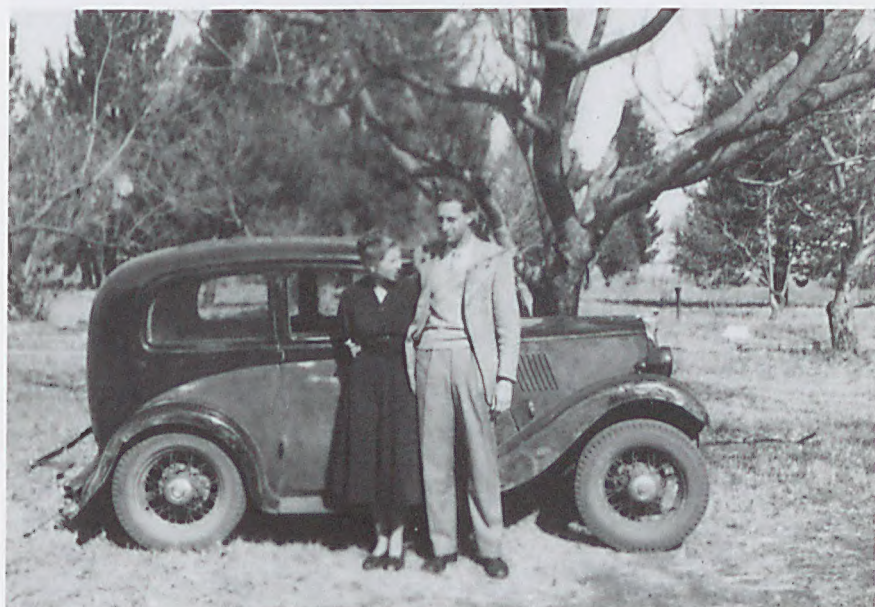


Fig. 3. Courtenay and Smila with their first car, outside the school where Smila taught near Salisbury, Rhodesia, in the early 1950s.

countryside. There are people living in these places now, so presumably some of these practices were successful.

Courtenay really loved the life (Fig. 4) and especially being in close contact with the animals and the birds. He realised that there was no future in trying to kill all mammals; it was wrong policy and he did not want to be involved with that type of work. He was also not really a field worker by nature and needed a more academic type of work. He applied for and got a post in Natal at the Wattle Research Institute, affiliated to the University of Pietermaritzburg. At that time Australian wattles (*Acacia decurrens* Willd.) were planted in huge plantations all over the hills. The trees grew in rows for miles and they were pruned by cutting off the side branches at the bottom, so that the trees grew very tall and straight. After 10 years they were cut down and the bark removed and the tannin extracted to be used in the leather tanning industry. (These days artificial tannin is used). Courtenay was left in charge of the Entomology Department while the chief entomologist went to Europe on 6 months leave. This was an opportunity for Courtenay to do something just for himself. He chose the main pest of the wattles, the bagworm moth *Kotochalia junodi* (Heylaerts) and its parasitic wasp, the ichneumonid *Sericopimpla sericata* (Kreichbaumer). The bagworm lives on other acacia species in Africa but the wattle plantations were an ideal single species planting and he found it an ideal life history study. These pest bagworms are sometimes so numerous that they can defoliate whole trees, and from the air patches can be seen where large numbers of trees have been stripped.

The newly hatched larvae leave the parent bag and waft in the breeze on a silken thread to a likely host tree where it spins a little cocoon. The wingless female lives in this all her life, never emerging; she eats the wattle leaves and uses the small stalks to build her bag, enlarging it as she grows. The male lives in a similar bag but, when adult, it flies in search of a female. They copulate through the end of her bag. When the eggs hatch, the larvae leave the bag and waft away to find a suitable place to live. In the lab a great many bagworms were cut open; when carefully done the insect inside continues life apparently unconcerned. During the season the life history was completed and a paper on the study was prepared and published in the journal of the Entomological Society of Southern Africa. On his return the chief entomologist was not too pleased that his junior did all this without his knowledge. Anyway that was the end of Courtenay's decision making. Thereafter he had to toe the line and do as he was told. The work continued. There was more aerial spraying of plantations and cooperation between the wattle plantation owners. This was the second time that Courtenay was sprayed with insecticide while supervising aerial spraying not wearing protective clothing. Pietermaritzburg is a very pleasant town near the Drakensberg Mountains and would have been a lovely place to make a home.



Fig 4. Courtenay with butterfly net and rifle in the field at Sebungwe.

Courtenay and Smila were married in Pietermaritzberg in 1954 (Fig. 5) and at this time she taught in a beautiful school: St. Charles College. He became more and more restless at work and frequently disagreed with his senior till one day things became very heated and Courtenay went home and discussed the situation with Smila. The next day he gave notice. They lived for six months on her teacher's salary while they looked around for a new post.

It was soon after they were married that they discussed his choice of an insect group to study. He was drawn to parasitic wasps. His old professor, John Omer-Cooper at Rhodes University, was a water beetle specialist and he was keen on a student to follow in his footsteps. Smila really liked these insects but Courtenay wanted a group that had not been "messed about" by specialists. He decided on Psocoptera, a group that he thought was small in size and in the number of genera. They spent every weekend in the country searching for psocids, but soon began to find suitable methods of identifying the sort of trees where they were likely to be found and methods of collecting. While he was unemployed he was given laboratory space, use of their library and a key to rooms at the Natal Museum. This was a marvellous opportunity to begin his card indexes, to write to all the living people still working in the group and to find papers of everything ever published. This continued all his life.

Eventually he decided that he would like to live in Rhodesia, where Smila had grown up. He went back to Salisbury (now Harare) in 1956 to work in the Entomology Department and Smila started teaching at David Livingstone School, a short walk away from the Research farm where all the agricultural offices were and experimental work on crops was carried out. Rhodesia was a wonderful country to live in while David Livingstone was a beautiful modern school and life was full of promise. Work for Courtenay and the other entomologists consisted of studying all pest species connected with agriculture and also other duties like handing out permits for introducing new plants, inspecting plant nurseries and so on. Work was pleasant but there is always a problem area. Farmers would consult the department about pests: army worm, tobacco beetle, maize stalk borer, water weeds on dams, even ageing maggots on corpses and so many other problems. But the staff could never run experiments on pests, usually only suggesting insecticide remedies and hoping for the best. All this time psocids were the evening occupation for both of them. Every weekend was spent collecting and sorting. Life was good. All holidays were spent in game reserves, on rivers looking at water birds, always with collecting materials and butterfly nets.

Courtenay was making a name for himself as a specialist in psocids. He was also involved in bird watching groups, going on field trips with other international zoologists, mammalogists, ornithologists and botanists, many of whom stayed with them in Salisbury. It was a place where naturalists liked to visit to see the wild life, to see the insect collections and life was good. The



Fig. 5. Courtenay and Smila at their wedding in Pietermaritzberg, South Africa in 1954.

climate in Salisbury was excellent, people were friendly, servants affordable and entertaining was no problem, but there is always a niggling and the problem was that Courtenay did not like taking orders and doing other seniors' bidding. He became restless once more and tried to find an occupation somewhere where he could make his own decisions.

The Australian Museum was the answer! So once more they packed up, Smila very reluctant to leave home to go into the unknown. At least in Sydney people spoke the same language and Courtenay had his own department. This was 1960 and was to be their final move. Museum work and life in Australia suited them well.